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FORMING A COALITION

Office of Minority Health

Division of Community Demonstrations and Assistance

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FORMING A COALITION LESSONS LEARNED

The following is a compilation of ideas taken from the publications listed on the last page. It was decided not to interrupt the flow of the text with footnotes. OMH has prepared this paper with the anticipation that you will find the ideas presented here interesting enough to read the original works. They can be obtained by calling the Office of Minority Health's Resource Center at (800) 444-6472. OMH hopes that the ideas and experiences presented here will assist you in developing more efficient and effective community health coalitions.

INTRODUCTION

Coalitions are influential organizations that can change the member organizations and the communities they serve. Coalitions can be effective on certain problems like preventive health, community safety, environmental hazards, and specific advocacy goals because they involve active participation of different groups in the community: health facilities, schools, churches, business, local government, police, and other community organizations. The membership is representative of the community. Most members are organizations. However, some coalitions will accept individuals as members because of their expertise. Coalitions require hard work, organizational coordination, and effecting a balance between group cohesion and member autonomy. To be successful the activities must be focused and manageable, involve all members, and focus on activities which would be difficult for organizations to implement alone. It's worth the extra effort to form a coalition -- work together -- because benefits could not be attained alone.

WHY FORM A COALITION

Coalitions evolve out of common needs of the organizers. Today's public health problems require cooperative action by many organizations, creative solutions and involvement by all levels of our communities, and an understanding of their diverse cultural and social make-up.

Coalitions can: create more public recognition and visibility; expand the scope and range of services; enhance influence in advocacy, education, and resource development; avoid duplication of services and fill gaps in service delivery; and, accomplish what single organizations cannot.

FACTORS INFLUENCING A COALITION'S SUCCESS

The following have been identified as important criteria for success: planning well, starting small, publicizing small successes, giving credit for ideas, sharing responsibilities, and letting the coalition grow over time. Begin with people who are interested; a shared and clear commitment to the purpose is the single most important factor contributing to success. Don't waste time trying to include people who should be involved but who simply are not interested; conversely, don't exclude groups that logically might have something to contribute.

Coalitions are task oriented and issue focused. Critical is the definition of a purpose. The purpose has to be agreed to by all members of the group. The purpose defines the direction and future of the coalition. **A single specific and not broad purpose works best.** Having more than one depletes the resources of the group; it is possible but not recommended to tackle several problems if tasks are divided.

With representative leaders, prepare and plan future steps which will be presented to all the members for discussion, modification, and agreement:

- * define the coalition's purpose what it will do and also what it will not do;
- * decide on clear goals that relate to the purpose, and objectives that are measurable, time-specific and tied to the goals;
- * decide on how administrative and financial arrangements will be handled during the formation period;
- * decide on the best structure (board of directors, dues, membership, incorporated or not);
- * decide on leadership (may want to appoint temporary leader, letting strong leader emerge as coalition develops);
- * prepare formal eligibility criteria for membership;
- * prepare memorandum of understanding for agreements between members and coalition;
- * prepare a **REALISTIC** work plan (list goals, objectives, tasks, timetables, and people or organizations responsible);

- * establish a procedure to address problems and conflicts openly to avoid factionalism;
- * establish a steering committee or an advisory board for the coalition (different levels of participation) with a large number of members who can meet more often than the whole coalition;
- * decide not to take positions which are bound to be divisive because they pit members against each other.

FACTORS HINDERING A COALITION'S EFFECTIVENESS

Once operational, coalitions can be effective change agents. However, they could require more commitment, time, and energy to start than a community organization because of the organization and coordination required. People have to be committed to the coalition's purpose, and the goals and objectives have to be realistic and achievable within a reasonable time.

Coalitions can fail for various reasons:

- * unclear or too broad a purpose or losing focus of the purpose;
- * goals and objectives are not clear, measurable or time specific;
- * disparities on values, and purposes of the member organizations;
- * unclear or unrealistic expectation about the coalition's roles, its responsibilities, or the time and resources required to establish and maintain a coalition;
- * lack of leadership, planning, and organization;
- * failure to acknowledge individual needs of members or member organizations;
- * conflicting loyalties, vested interests, and fear of domination by one organization or individual;
- * lack of adequate funds and/or personnel to carry out goals;
- * failure to produce results commensurate with the time and effort expended; and,

- * focusing on obstacles and current realities rather than future possibilities;
- * overreliance on a charismatic leader.

LEADERSHIP AND STAFF CHARACTERISTICS

Staffing needs are determined by the scope of a coalition's activity. It is essential to have someone (volunteer or not) in the role of director or coordinator (authority over administrative and financial) who has decision making power. Experience has shown that coalitions need more staff time during formation. Even with staff, coalitions are rarely effective unless they are bound by commitment, shared interests, and priorities sufficient to insure ongoing participation by a significant proportion of their members. A coalition is likely to survive if each member believes that it will receive benefits (more referrals, improved programming) comparable to its level of contribution and if members shares responsibilities to build commitment and sense of accomplishment.

A leader exhibiting the following qualities will be more successful: experience in dealing with diverse groups, fairness, ability to assign tasks and delegate responsibility, sense of humor, and skills in communication, negotiation, conflict management, organizational development, group facilitation, and being politically savvy.

The function of a coalition leader is not to make independent decisions but rather to facilitate the group's decision-making process. Leadership roles include motivating participation, structuring group interactions, negotiating among people and organizations with diverse agendas, and maintaining and communicating enthusiasm through good and bad times.

DECISION MAKING PROCESS AND STRUCTURE

Structure and processes should allow for open discussions of established interests since group cooperation is needed. The structure must allow for the active, effective participation of all members. The smaller and more informal the group, the less structure that is required. Organizational considerations for establishing a coalition: by-laws; membership; roles and responsibilities; staffing; funding; inter-organizational agreements.

Coalitions use a variety of decision making processes to some degree: consensus, elite (leadership decides), formal vote, negotiation, and member veto. Overall, consensus is the most prevalent form of decision making in all functional areas except for administration/division of labor, where staff should decide.

Coalition boards and officers tend to make decisions about administration and division of labor, and handle strategies, structure, and membership. A steering committee's primary responsibility is setting goals.

COALITION TENSION AND ITS MANAGEMENT

Tension in coalitions is generally centered on unity/diversity, goal definition, accountability/autonomy, turf issues, and struggle for scarce resources. Coalitions have a wide variety of means of conflict resolution, including allowing for different levels and types of participation, only taking action if there was consensus, leaving room for dissension and agreeing to disagree. **Conflict will arise; coalitions need skills in conflict management and resolution.** Local conflict resolution resources could be universities or labor unions.

A critical issue in dealing with individual members in a coalition of organizations is how to give individuals a meaningful role while maintaining a decision making process which recognizes that the organization represents a constituency of many individuals.

WRAP-UP

OMH trusts that this paper has been of assistance to you in developing your coalition. If you have any question, please don't hesitate to call your OMH Project Officer or the Resource Center for information.

Keep in mind there's no standard, cookbook way to form a coalition. No two communities have identical experiences, needs, or problems. Coalitions grow and change as the community or obstacles change.

Publications Cited

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